

I. BACKGROUND

The mission of the DHS is to protect and improve the health of all Californians, including reducing the occurrence of preventable disease, disabilities, and premature death. Consistent with this mission, an ultimate goal of public health programs is to reduce teenage and unwed pregnancy and fatherlessness resulting from these pregnancies.

California continues to face the problem of absent fathers and teenage and unwed pregnancies, which is having devastating effects on our children and society. Societal change, including the breakdown of the family and erosion of neighborhood support networks, has taken its toll on our youth, our families, and our communities.

One in three California children is born out-of-wedlock, up from just nine percent only a generation ago. Among teens, the out-of-wedlock birthrate is as high as two of every three children born. Children who grow up without fathers are five times more likely to be poor, twice as likely to drop out of school, and much more likely to end up in foster care or juvenile justice facilities. Girls raised in single-parent families are three times more likely to become unwed teen mothers themselves. Boys without fathers are more likely to become incarcerated, unemployed and uninvolved with their own children when they become fathers.

Other costs are seen in related problems such as illicit drug and alcohol use, school dropout rates, and violent crimes, which have risen among youth. Close to one in five students drop out before graduating from high school.

The consequences of teenage and unwed pregnancy and fatherlessness are significant and far-reaching. An estimated \$3 to \$7 billion in federal and state dollars is spent annually for public assistance, Medi-Cal, and Food Stamps for California families that began with an unwed teen parent.

Teen birth rates in California rose by over one-third, from 52 to 71 births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19 between 1980 and 1992. Since 1992, the teen birth rate has been declining. Although California continues to make significant strides in reducing births to teenagers (e.g., births to California teens aged 10-19 declined eight percent between 1996 and 1997, from 64,604 to 61,107 births), the magnitude and seriousness of the situation requires the continued mobilization of our communities.

California still has the largest number of babies born to teens in the nation and its teen birth rate (61.6) is higher than the United States' rate of 54.7 (1996). Teen births accounted for 12 percent of all births in California and nearly one quarter of these births were to teens who already had children. Approximately 63% of all teen mothers are unmarried.

Risk factors cited most often in research as predictors of teen pregnancy include poverty, low academic achievement, poor basic employment skills, drug and alcohol use, history of foster care, daughter or sister of a teen mother, living in a single parent household, and parents with low educational levels. Nearly 75 percent of girls who had intercourse before age 14 and 60 percent of those who had sex before age 15 years of age report having sex involuntarily.

Research on male sexual responsibility indicates that males have less accurate information about sexuality, contraception, and pregnancy than females. Both adolescent and adult males tend to place greater responsibility for using contraception on females. Although there has been recently more emphasis on the male's role in preventing teen pregnancies (i.e., the state-funded Male Involvement Program), the more traditional, long standing teen pregnancy prevention efforts have been largely female-focused. Thus, more strategies need to be developed and implemented to support male involvement in preventing teen and unwed pregnancies and promoting responsible parenting.

Adult males father two thirds of the babies born to teen girls. These adult males are breaking the law; it is illegal for an adult to have sex with a minor. A large number of these men have minimal or no involvement in the prevention or consequences of these pregnancies, including parenting or providing financial support. Studies indicate that 84 percent of fathers of children born to teen girls live apart from their children.

A fundamental change in societal attitudes toward teenage and unwed pregnancy and fatherlessness is imperative. While government can provide leadership and an investment of resources, it cannot solve the problem alone. Success will depend on the recognition of local communities, civic and religious institutions, and the private sector of the extent of the problem and a willingness to assume responsibility for developing and implementing comprehensive, locally driven solutions to continue the declining trend of births to teenagers.